

## THE DIPTERISTS' FORUM: A MODEL FOR OTHERS TO FOLLOW?

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One of the features of recent decades has been the proliferation of invertebrate recording schemes. Some of these are very active, providing the support that is needed in terms of assistance with identification, new keys, field meetings and other events that bring people together, and in particular, newsletters that maintain enthusiasm for a common purpose.

Directly or indirectly, various new societies have been generated. The Balfour Brown Club (water beetles) is a prime example. The British Dragonfly Society grew, in large part, out of the success of the dragonfly recording scheme. Apart from insects, one only has to look at the BRC atlas on terrestrial and freshwater molluscs to appreciate what a dynamo recording has been in the Conchological Society, and the British Arachnological Society was begun by enthusiasts for recording in the field.

A further element in this growth has been the increasing range of identification keys and books that have opened up taxonomic groups that were previously fraught. With groups such as butterflies, dragonflies and grasshoppers, which are suitable for the general naturalist (including ornithologists suffering from boredom in the mid-season lull in birds), the relationship between good books and adherents is obvious. One only has to look to moths to see this effect. A decline in popularity followed a decline in plate quality in the last edition of the book by South, and the marked rise in popularity followed publication of better illustrated books.

On the back of this enthusiasm for insects, conservation has become a growing concern. Butterfly Conservation has gained a large membership, taking the lead with the butterfly recording scheme, whilst the British Dragonfly Society, with its recording base, is developing its own conservation role.

So where does this leave a long-standing traditional society such as the BENHS? In my own experience, from virtual isolation as an entomologist, it was a revelation to attend a 'South London' meeting in 1966 and find such activity going on, unbeknown to me, only half a mile from my office. Since that date, lures for allegiance from recording schemes and new societies have arisen, yet, apart from Lepidoptera, the Society is becoming less and less central to the action. The Society has taken no lead in recording, or for that matter conservation, which are the two main growth points in entomological activity. The chances are that the isolated entomologist of today will discover recording schemes, or conservation orientated societies, and not the BENHS.

The move to Dinton Pastures was from the outset seen as providing new opportunities, such as the workshop meetings and open days at the weekend for access to the collections and library. Many of us hope that other opportunities can be found that will increase the relevance of the Society to entomologists.

As regards Diptera, the Society already has about 80 members who are solely dipterists or include flies in wider entomological interests. The Society has published *British hoverflies*, which has been a success in stimulating study of these insects and focused attention on the Society, including drawing in more dipterists as members. The BENHS journal has published papers on Diptera and some dipterists have played a prominent role in the society, not least Peter Chandler as Curator. However, the main action, centred on recording schemes, has been outside the Society.

Hence at a time when the dipterists find it necessary to set up their own 'society', the concept of affiliation to BENHS as the Dipterists' Forum has emerged as an option with considerable merits.

## THE DIPTERISTS' FORUM

### *Origin of concept*

After 21 years, the Diptera recording schemes have reached the point where a formal organization has become essential. To the present we have managed to get all our circulars and newsletters produced free but at long last we have had to face up to collecting subscriptions, and there are other previously free services to be covered. Hence we have to set up an administration and also spread the tasks more equitably. Thus we may as well go the full hog and form a society.

This was discussed at the recording schemes annual meeting in November 1993. Whilst there was support for starting a society there was also considerable concern at this further step in fragmenting entomology into isolated disciplines. Quite a few dipterists have wider entomological interests. Hence it was put to the meeting that we should consider affiliation with a parent national society, with BENHS as the most compatible option. Since various other recording groups watch for how the dipterists operate, it was possible that this could start a momentum towards bringing entomology together again.

A small working party was set up which produced a consultation document for scheme organizers, outlining the implications and options. With unanimous support, the relevant parts of the consultation document were sent to BENHS Council to seek affiliation. A meeting was held at Dinton Pastures in April 1994 to discuss the implications with representatives of Council, and having clarified various points, Council agreed to affiliation at its July meeting. The Forum held its inaugural AGM in November 1994 and is now functioning as intended.

### *Objectives*

(a) To foster the study of Diptera, linking with other disciplines where there is a relationship with other animals and plants.

(b) To promote recording of all aspects of the natural history of flies, including the advancement of distribution mapping.

(c) To encourage and support amateurs, in harmony with professionals in museums, institutes and universities.

(d) To promote conservation of flies.

(d) To organize indoor meetings, workshops, field meetings and other relevant events.

(f) To disseminate news and information via newsletters and publications.

(g) To focus on the flies of the British Isles, whilst maintaining an interest in Europe and elsewhere.

Our journal, *Dipterists Digest*, has an increasing list of foreign subscribers and there is a great deal of interest abroad in how British dipterists organize themselves.

### *Background history*

The Forum has evolved out of the launch of the Crane-fly Recording Scheme in 1973. Even the first indoor meeting had people coming from as far as Scotland and

the first week-long field meeting in 1974 had 14 people. Newsletters were produced. Soon there were 80 people registered, with a quarter of that number attending week-long field meetings. A need was clearly being met, but it was soon apparent that the popularity was not so much crane flies as bringing together people with a wider interest in Diptera.

The demand was for a hoverfly recording scheme. In 1976 such a scheme, together with recording schemes for a few other groups of flies, was launched. All the meetings and events were run under the auspices of the Central Panel of Diptera Recording Scheme organizers, with a coordinator who produced a *Bulletin* of the Diptera recording schemes. Most of the schemes produced newsletters, some quite vigorously, and indeed there are newsletters for various study groups which are not running recording schemes as such. In the last 2 years we have run residential workshops based at Preston Montford Field Centre in Shropshire, with over 30 people attending for the two themes so far, hoverflies and pictured-wing flies.

We encourage the study of flies well beyond the recording schemes, and indeed on field meetings it can be amazing the range of insect groups which are being recorded in response to requests for material. The recording schemes, inevitably, are in various states of advancement. Provisional BRC atlases have been published for two groups of crane flies (long-palped crane flies and Ptychopteridae), for Sepsidae and with selected maps for larger Brachycera (robber flies etc.). Sets of maps have also been produced for snail-killing flies, meniscus midges and selected mosquitoes and various other flies.

Increasingly we are looking to our own resources to computerize data for atlas production. The Hoverfly Recording Scheme now has well over 200 000 records processed on computer, with many more records in hand.

It is important to emphasize two things. Firstly, we are concerned with all aspects of improving knowledge on the identification, life history, behaviour and ecology of flies; distribution maps are but one output of our combined recording effort. Secondly, the existence of the national schemes has been a stimulus to various county or district recording schemes and some of these have already produced excellent atlases.

At present there are 12 recording schemes and study groups: crane flies (Tipulidae sl, Trichoceridae, Ptychopteridae and Anisopodidae), meniscus midges (Dixidae), mosquitoes, fungus gnats, chironomid midges, hoverflies, larger Brachycera (robber flies, soldier flies, horseflies etc.), Dolichopodidae & Empidae, Pipunculidae, Conopidae, snail-killing flies, Tephritidae (pictured-wing flies), and Sepsidae.

The annual meeting in the autumn, held at the Natural History Museum in London, attracts about 80 (it used to be over 100 until costs of travel became so high), with people still coming from as far afield as Scotland, plus one or two from Europe, especially for the event. We have a morning series of lectures and in the afternoon exhibits, demonstrations and discussion topics. A separately run Dipterists' Dinner is held in the evening, a buffet with 40 to 50 attending.

In the last 21 years we have held a week-long field meeting over a wide geographic area; sometimes there have been twin-centred fortnights. In a week we expect to cover anything up to 100 sites within up to 30 10-km squares. We also hold long-weekend autumn field meetings and various one-day meetings. Over the years we have dramatically increased knowledge of ecology and distribution of flies by blitzing under-recorded areas, including the addition of about 50 species to the British list.

The enthusiasm for the recording schemes gave confidence for the launch of a refereed journal, *Dipterists Digest*, run as a separate venture but now being brought into Forum publications.

### *The advantages of affiliation to BENHS*

The Forum will in any event have to set up its own structure and administration which will to all intents and purposes amount to a society. Affiliation is an elastic term for the present since it will take time to sort out with the Charities Commissioners whether an affiliated Forum is within BENHS charitable status. Hence, it will be a loose affiliation for an initial period of 3 years. It would be an undue imposition to *require* all recording scheme dipterists to join BENHS, though 80 are already members, and the hope is that more will join. Hence the affiliation is with the Forum, not individual members, but we are looking to something much more meaningful than a token label.

So what is the advantage? It cuts both ways, since there is advantage to both BENHS and the Forum.

The Forum brings to the Society an active group of field-orientated entomologists, with considerable experience in running events and producing information which has been a successful catalyst in helping people find their feet in entomology and in generating enthusiasm for common objectives. Not least it brings to the Society a major locus in national recording schemes. It is *not* a case of dipterists trying to take over, but it means that the Society gains a broader image than catering largely for Lepidoptera. It also further enhances its image as a national society (the South London connection still within memory). The hope is that the Society will gain more affiliations and be stimulated into meeting the needs of members of all disciplines. Field meetings should become more viable as greater numbers of entomologists are invited and there is increased expertise to call on for running workshops at Dinton Pastures. The collection and library are more likely to be strengthened as Forum members recognize the value of Dinton Pastures. The long-term prospects for the Society to be offered key works for publication is enhanced.

The advantage of affiliation to the Forum is the wish of many of its members to be part of a multi-disciplinary entomological society rather becoming yet another isolated part of entomology. The BENHS has a membership of kindred spirits and is the only national society with a collection, library and day workshop facilities, notably available at weekends. There has already been the successful relationship in publishing *British hoverflies*. With the Forum setting out without a cushion of money in the kitty, it is reassuring to find that the Society can provide limited bridging loans if the need arises (we expect to balance the books each year). There is also the benefit of the advice of entomologists used to running the Society, and potential advantages of an umbrella society such as the charitable status that these days is difficult and expensive to obtain by new groups such as the dipterists.

### *Conclusion*

The affiliation, in the first instance, is for 3 years. We think it will work well and hopefully everyone will find that the Forum concept will prove a stimulus within and outside the Society.

Martin Drake has joined BENHS Council to represent the Dipterists' Forum and Peter Chandler is BENHS Council's representative on the Dipterists' Forum committee. Alan Stubbs is the Dipterists' Forum Secretary.